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STUDYING OTTOMAN KARAMÜRSEL VESSELS THE SOURCES AND THE NEED FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Abstract: The amount of knowledge we have about *caramoussals* can be regarded as insufficient, as long as there is no agreement among scholars even on the naval architecture of these sailcrafts. As Ottoman sources have failed to advance research in this field, more attention should be paid to sources from Christian Europe. This paper investigates the existing sources, both Ottoman and Christian, and how historians have approached them so far, in order to assess if there is more to learn from them. Firstly, the paper concludes that there are two assumptions responsible for the inability of scholars to reach consensus: 1) that the term *karamürsel* is the name given to a single type of vessel; 2) that the available sources reflect contradictory and mutually exclusive information. Secondly, it refutes these presumptions as unfounded, and instead postulates as a methodological premise the following certainty: the information discussed here is complementary in nature, since it complements each other. The main argument employed here is provided by a Florentine manuscript containing drawings of vessels called *caramussali*, which have different characteristics. It can be inferred from this that the term *karamürsel* was not applied to a single type of vessel, but was used to designate simultaneously different types of vessels. This new approach to sources opens up several research opportunities, which the author insists on at the end of his paper.

Keywords: ships and boats, historical sources, naval architecture, Ottoman Empire.

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We argued in a previous paper that Ottoman *karamürsel* vessels share a past that can be traced in all the cardinal directions of the Mediterranean Sea¹. Beyond the fact that at first sight they come as a “historical curiosity”, this empirical reality retains a cognitive potential still unexplored for the most part. It suggests the idea that studying these ships can benefit from the contribution of unused sources that come from outside the Islamic half of the Mediterranean. The present study

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¹ Cristian Nicolae Apetrei, “Vasele otomane *karamürsel* în secolele XVI-XVII. O istorie mediteraneană”, *Analele Universității «Dunărea de Jos» din Galați. Istorie* 21 (2022): 49-61.

compiles these sources, aiming to highlight their relevance for the research layout. The most important result of the investigation is to reach the conclusion that some of the analyzed sources can change the methodological paradigm on which the research of this subject is based.

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The approach of such a topic is usually based on descriptive sources, such as naval architecture treatises and iconography of that time. But the Ottomans often resorted to Christian craftsmen for building their own ships, so they had no concerns to theorize this activity². On the other hand, Ottoman iconographic sources are quite numerous. However, they are not helpful either, because the texts they accompany avoid associating them with the *caramoussal* vessels. A comparative research of Piri Reis's sketches in *Kitab-ı Bahriye* is eloquent in this regard. The absence of the term *karamürsel* from the text made the research author try to identify those specific vessels based on an assumption: that Piri Reis has systematically substituted it with the generic term *kayık* (boat)³. Consequently, resorting to European sources becomes mandatory.

The naval treaties of Bartolomeo Crescentio, Pantero Pantera and Joseph Fürtttenbach are sources of reference for 16th-17th century Europe⁴. Fortunately, these authors were interested in the Ottoman world, which is why they include some valuable data on the *karamürsels*. Fürtttenbach even delivers the graphic representation of such a vessel, attributes to Barbary corsairs⁵. So far, this is the only known source that associates the image of a sailcraft with the term *karamürsel*. We

² Colin Imber, "The Navy of Suleyman the Magnificent", *Archivum Ottomanicum* 6 (1980): 242-243; Gábor Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, 2005), 48, 193; Maria Pia Pedani, "Ottoman Ships and Venetian Craftsmen in the 16th Century", in: Dejanirah Couto, Feza Gunergun, Maria Pia Pedani (eds.), *Seapower, Technology and Trade: Studies in Turkish Maritime History* (İstanbul, 2014), 460-464; Philip MacDougall, *Islamic Seapower during the Age of Fighting Sail* (Woodbridge, 2017), 67, 78-80; Elina Gugliuzzo, "Sea Power and the Ottomans in the Early Modern Mediterranean World", in: Georgios Theotokis, Aysel Yıldız (eds.), *A Military History of the Mediterranean Sea: Aspects of War, Diplomacy, and Military Elites* (Leiden-Boston, 2018), 82.

³ Okay Sütçüoğlu, *Piri Reis'in gemileri: Rönesans sanatına meydan okuma* (İstanbul, 2019), 82.

⁴ Bartolomeo Crescentio Romano, *Nautica mediterranea* (Roma, 1607), 4; Pantero Pantera, *L'armata nauale* (Roma, 1613), 40, 42, 44; Joseph Fürtttenbach, *Architectura Navalis. Das ist: von dem Schiff-Gebäw* (Ulm, 1629), 107-111.

⁵ Fürtttenbach, *Architectura Navalis*, fig. 17.

also found useful a few European dictionaries, which generally take over the original information collected by Georges Guillet de Saint Georges⁶.

The data in these sources allowed the analysis of the European iconography in search of other graphic representations. In doing so, R. Morton Nance and Joseph Muscat hypothetically identified three such vessels: one in the sketches of the Dutch painter Abraham Casembroot, the other two in the numerous graffiti discovered in Malta⁷.

To these two fundamental categories of sources the numerous travel reports through the Ottoman Empire should be added. Some of them are extremely useful, as they provide technical data on the ship structural design, hulls and superstructures⁸.

In recent decades, Turkish historians have published numerous registers of *kadis* courts of law in the Ottoman capital⁹. These registers excel through two types of information. On the one hand, they insist on the dimensions of the vessels,

⁶ Georges Guillet de Saint Georges, *Les arts de l'homme d'epée ou Le dictionnaire du gentilhomme*⁵ (La Haye, 1686); Nicolas Aubin, *Dictionnaire de marine contenant les termes de la navigation et de l'architecture navale* (Amsterdam, 1702); Alexandre Savérien, *Dictionnaire historique, théorique et pratique de marine* (Paris, 1758), vol. 1; Amiral [Jean-Baptiste Philibert] Willaumez, *Dictionnaire de la marine avec huit planches*³ (Paris, 1831).

⁷ R. Morton Nance, "Answers: Sprintsails", *Mariner's Mirror*, 3:5 (1913): 155; Joseph Muscat, *Il-Graffiti Marittimi Maltin* (Valetta, 2002), 252, 255-256; Sütçüoğlu, *Piri Reis'in gemileri*, 84 (fig. 47a).

⁸ Natale Conti, *Commentarii Hieronymi Comitit Alexandrini de acerrimo, ac omnium difficillimo Turcarum bello, in insulam Melitam gesto, anno MDLXV* (Venezia, 1566); Gasparo Balbi, *Viaggio dell Indie Orientali* (Venezia, 1590); Johann Christoph Tayfel, *Il viaggio del molto illustre signor Giovanni Christophoro Taifel, barone in Gunderstorff Austriaco, fatto di Constantinopoli verso Levante* (Vienna, 1598); Jean Palerne, *Peregrinations du S. Jean Palerne Foresien, Secretaire de François de Valois Duc d'Anjou* (Lyon, 1606); Nicolas Bénard, *Le voyage de Hierusalem et autres lieux de la terre sainte, fait par le sieur Benard Parisien Chevalier de l'ordre du Saint Sépulchre de Notre Seigneur Jesus Christ [...]* (Paris, 1621); Louis Deshayes de Courmenin, *Voiage de Levant fait par le commandement du Roy en l'année 1621* (Paris, 1624); Henry Blount, *A Voyage into the Levant. A Breife Relation of a Journey Lately Performed*² (London, 1636); William Lithgow, *The Rare Adventures and Painefull Peregrinations of Long Nineteene Yeares Travayles from Scotland to the most famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Affrica* (Glasgow, 1906); Marcel Lami, Léo Rouanet (eds.), *Mémoires du capitain Alonso de Contreras: Lequel de marmiton se lit commandeur de Malte* (Paris, 1911); António Baiao, *Itinerarios da Índia a Portugal por terra* (Coimbra, 1923); William F. Sinclair, Donald Gerguson (eds.), *The Travel of Pedro Teixeira; with His "Kings of Harmuz", and extract from His "Kings of Persia"* (Farnham, Surrey, 2010).

⁹ *Kadı Sicilleri Katalogu Project*, ISAM (Centre for Islamic Studies): <http://www.kadisicilleri.org/index.php>; Timur Kuran (ed.), *Mahkeme Kayıtları Işığında 17. Yüzyıl İstanbul'unda Sosyo-Ekonomik Yaşam. Social and Economic Life in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul: Glimpses from Court Records*, 10 vols. (İstanbul, 2010).

favoring the collection of a series of this kind of data. On the other hand, they allow the exploration of some aspects of the relationship between the vessels concerned and the Ottoman society, such as: the status of the owners, the types of property and the market value of the vessels.

However, the interpretation of these sources has led to different reconstruction solutions. For some scholars, the *karamürsel* was a small vessel rigged for-and-aft, with two masts. Given its small dimensions, it could use rows, as an alternative means of propelling¹⁰. According to others, it was a square-rigged ship. But the consensus of the latter stops here, as the details of the vessel place them in different positions. For example, Alberto Tenenti defines it as “a very light and manoeuvrable ship used in the Levant, long and narrow, with a single deck, a tall stern and not more than five sails. The freight capacity was 1,000–1,500 *salme*”¹¹. But according to Colin Imber, it was rather “a small, single-decked sailing ship”¹². The third group brings together historians describing a ship with mixed rig. There is no consensus here either when it comes to ship structural design. Most of the members of this group recall a sail plan consisting of two masts and three sails: the mainmast was carrying two square sails, while the mizzenmast had a lateen sail¹³. This reconstruction is contradicted by more recent voices that talk about full-rigged ships, equipped with two square sails on the mainmast, a square sail on the

¹⁰ Hayati Tezel, *Anadolu Türklerinin deniz tarihi*, vol. 1 (İstanbul, 1973), 720; İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devletinin Merkez ve Bahriye Teşkilatı*³ (Ankara, 1988), 456; İdris Bostan, *Kürekli ve Yelkenli Osmanlı Gemileri* (İstanbul, 2005), 234; Nikolai Ovcharov, *Ships and Shipping in the Black Sea, 14th-19th Centuries* (Sofia, 1993), 86.

¹¹ Alberto Tenenti, *Naufraques, corsaires et assurances maritimes a Venise, 1592-1609* (Paris, 1959), 68; Idem, *Piracy and the Decline of Venice, 1580-1615* (Oxford, 1967), 153. Similar descriptions are provided by Giuseppe Gino Guarnieri, *Cavalieri di Santo Stefano: Contributo alla storia della marina militare italiana* (Pisa, 1928), 134 (note 2); G. Trogneux, *Histoire des navires. Des origines au XIX^e siècle* (Saint-Malo, 2001), 70.

¹² Colin Imber, “The Navy of Suleyman the Magnificent”, *Archivum Ottomanicum* 6 (1980): 280.

¹³ Augustin Jal, *Archéologie navale*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1840), 225; Robert Mantran, *Istanbul dans la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1962), 488-489; M. Mollat du Jourdin, Christiane Villain-Gandossi, Jacqueline Martin-Bagnaudez, Chantal Roche, Marie-Christine Genillon, Eric Rieth, *Nouveau glossaire nautique d'Augustin Jal: Révision de l'édition publiée en 1848* (Paris-La Haye, 1978), 220; Kenneth M. Setton, *Venice, Austria, and the Turks in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1991), 126; Daniel Panzac, “Affrontement maritime et mutations technologiques en Mer Egee: l'Empire ottoman et la republique de Venise (1645-1740)”, in: Elizabeth Zachariadou (ed.), *Kapudan Pasha, His Office and His Domain*, (Rethymnon, 2002), 131 (note 10).

foremast and a lateen mizensail. With transport capacities (tonnages) of up to 900 tons, these were large vessels, similar to *galleons*¹⁴.

The causes of this obvious disagreement are related to both the contradictory information contained in the sources, as well as to the interpretation method that has been used. Using only the sources that do not contradict each other, most scholars predictably validated a single type of vessel and excluded the others. The exception was Idris Bostan and Michel Fontenay, who claimed that the term *karamürsel* designated different types of vessels¹⁵. However, the confirmation of this hypothesis has remained conditioned by the existence of sources that would record them simultaneously, and such sources have not been delivered so far.

The efforts made so far have largely ignored the piracy accounts which describe the attacks carried by the Christian corsairs on the Ottoman vessels and subjects. Viewed from a literary point of view, they belong to different genres: informative notes (*relazioni/relaciones, avvisi/avisos*), chronicles, letters, memoirs, biographies, travel reports. The years 1550-1650 seem to have been the most prolific in producing such writings, and this detail probably explains why they contain a large amount of information about *caramoussals*¹⁶.

By far, the most useful, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, are the reports on the expeditions undertaken in the Ottoman Mediterranean by the military orders “St John” from Malta and “St Stephen” from Pisa. Either collected in chronicles written by official historians or widespread by periodic prints with informative and propagandistic role, these reports contain repetitive information about the Ottoman vessels that they captured¹⁷. These texts provides several series of

¹⁴ Marco Gemignani, *Il cavaliere Iacopo Inghirami al servizio dei Granduchi di Toscana* (Pisa, 1996), 26; Yossi Dotan, *Watercraft on World Coins: Europe, 1800-2005*, vol. 1 (Sussex, 2007), 259.

¹⁵ İdris Bostan, “Gemi Yapımcılığı ve Osmanlı Donanmasında Gemiler”, in: Idris Bostan, Salih Özbaran (eds.), *Türk Denizcilik Tarihi*, vol. 1: *Başlangıçtan XVII. Yüzyılın Sonuna Kadar* (İstanbul, 2009), 332; Michel Fontenay, *La Méditerranée entre la croix et le croissant. Navigation, commerce, course et piraterie (XVI^e-XIX^e siècles)* (Paris, 2010), 242 (note 52).

¹⁶ According to Gilbert Buti and Philippe Hrodej, *Histoire des pirates et des corsaires: De l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris, 2016), 229-235, the 1570-1645 time span marked “l’apogée du corso méditerranéen”.

¹⁷ Didier Raul, “La lucha naval con turcos y berberiscos en el Mediterráneo según las relaciones de sucesos (siglo XVII)”, in: Pierre Civil, Françoise Crémoux, Jacobo Sanz (eds.), *España y el mundo mediterráneo a través de las relaciones de sucesos (1500-1750): Actas del IV Coloquio Internacional sobre Relaciones de Sucesos (Paris, 23-25 de septiembre de 2004)* (Salamanca, 2004), 237-252; Giovanni Ciappelli, “L’informazione e la propaganda: La guerra di corsa delle galee toscane contro turchi e barbareschi nel Seicento”, in: Giovanni Ciappelli, Valentina Nider (eds.), *La invención de las noticias: Las relaciones de sucesos entre la literatura y la información (siglos XVI-XVIII)* (Trento, 2017), 133-162; Anthony T.

data referring in particular to tonnage, the dimensions of the crews, boarded passengers, weapons and military on board. Occasionally, among them, information about the ship structural design, hulls and superstructures may also occur.

One of the sources brings even more than that: it contains drawings of the attacked Ottoman vessels, among which are several *caramoussals*. The source under consideration is a manuscript, entitled *Imprese delle galere toscane*, which is kept in the “Riccardiana” Library in Florence¹⁸. It was produced between 1602-1616 by one of the combatants, the knight Erasmo Magno da Velletri¹⁹. The sketches depict two masted ships, similar to the Mediterranean *pollaca/polacra*, as well as full rigged ships, precursors of the European *galleons*, which the author calls indiscriminately *caramoussali*. Therefore, the drawings of Erasmo Magno da Velletri undoubtedly show that the term *karamürsel* and its European derivatives were used to simultaneously indicate different types of boats. Further, the coexistence of these multiple types, distinct from a constructive point of view, is likely to explain why known sources often contain contradictory information. But the most important conclusion that emerges from here is methodological. It suggests that the way we approach the existing sources must be changed: instead of considering them to be contradictory, we must treat them as complementary.

The use of this new interpretative paradigms opens a whole series of research opportunities, particularly for the 1550-1650 period. The various types of *caramoussal* vessels certified in the sources of this time can be identified and researched in depth using as analyzing criteria the ship structural design, the cargo-carrying capacity, the crew dimension, the used armament and its efficiency. Finally, their discussion in the context of the maritime history of the Mediterranean can

Luttrell, “The Hospitallers’ Historical Activities: 1400-1530”, *Annales de l’Ordre Souverain Militaire de Malte* 25 (1967): 145-150; Idem, “The Hospitallers’ Historical Activities: 1530-1630”, *Annales de l’Ordre Souverain Militaire de Malte* 26 (1968): 57-69; Paul George Pisani, “Adaptations in Hospitaller Historiography: An Overview”, *Symposia Melitensia* 8 (2012): 49-62.

¹⁸ Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, *Imprese delle galere toscane*, ms. 1978.

¹⁹ The drawings were mainly used to reconstruct the Mediterranean military landscape, see: Giuseppina Scamardì, “Ghiaùr, Ghiaùr! Che vol dire ‘Christiani, Christiani!’ Racconti di offesa, strutture di difesa in un codice inedito (1602-1616)”, in: Francesca Martorano (ed.), *Progettare la difesa, rappresentare il territorio: Il codice Romano Carratelli e la fortificazione nel Mediterraneo secoli XVI-XVII* (Reggio Calabria, 2015), 328-329; Eadem, *Sì come il suo disegno dimostra: Città, porti, fortezze del Mediteraneo nelle imprese delle galere toscane (XVII secolo): L’Italia* (Roma, 2016); Eadem, “La Toscana negli schizzi di viaggio di Erasmo Magno da Velletri (1602)”, *L’Argentariana. Rivista di Cultura del Centro Studi Don Pietro Fanciulli* 1:1 (2017): 13-21; Eadem, “Alicante, terra e fortezza: La città e le sue fortificazioni in un disegno del 1611”, in: Echarri Iribarren (ed.), *Defensive Architecture of the Mediterranean, XV to XVIII Centuries*, vol. 5 (Alicante, 2017): 127-134.

change the perspective we have on how these vessels have been designed and used in the Ottoman world.



Fig. 1. Square-rigged *caramoussals* with two and three masts. Source: Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, *Imprese delle galere toscane*, ms. 1978, f. 051^v.



Fig. 2. A three-masted *caramoussal* with mixed rig (full rigged ship). Source: Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, *Imprese delle galere toscane*, ms. 1978, f. 128^r.

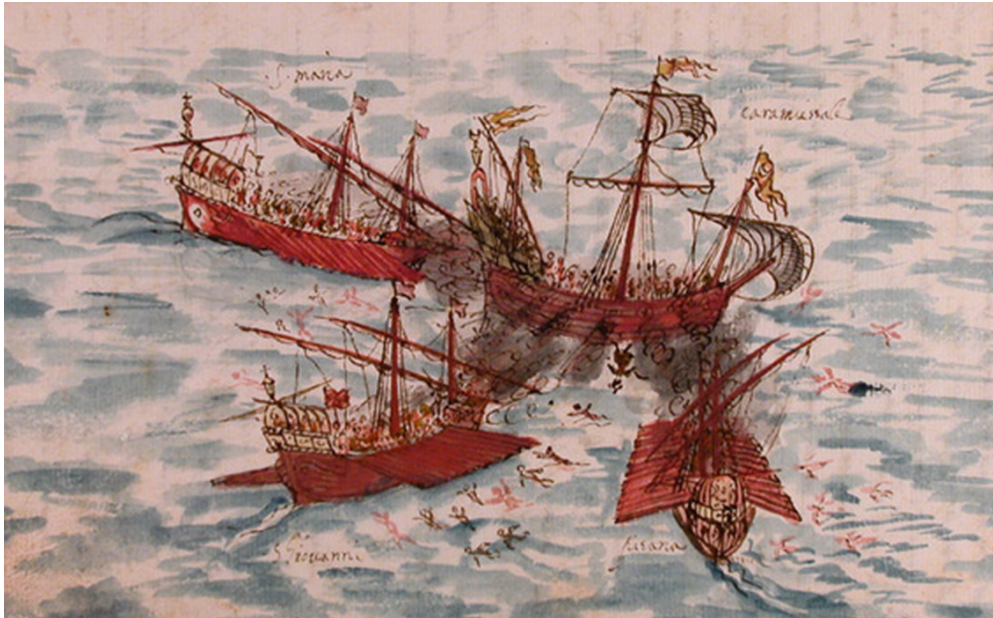


Fig. 3. A three-masted *caramoussal* with mixed rig (full rigged ship). Source: Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, *Imprese delle galere toscane*, ms. 1978, f. 129^r.



Fig. 4. Square-rigged *caramoussals* with two masts. Notice the resemblance to European *pollaca/polacra*. Source: Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, *Imprese delle galere toscane*, ms. 1978, f. 138^v-139^r.



Fig. 5. A square-rigged *caramoussal* with three masts (full rigged ship). Source: Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, *Imprese delle galere toscane*, ms. 1978, f. 150^r.



Fig. 6. A three-masted *caramoussal* with mixed rig (full rigged ship). Notice the resemblance to European *galleon*. Source: Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, *Imprese delle galere toscane*, ms. 1978, f. 254^r.

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